

The Epiphany of Our Lord
St. Matthew 2:1-12

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

I'll start this sermon by saying that I believe that there is no salvation outside of the Church. Let me explain... St. Mark put it this way: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; but whoever does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16) Faith is begotten and nurtured in the Church; outside of the Church, faith withers and dies, if it existed at all. Jesus saves—it is all His work; it is only unbelief that condemns. Is it possible for someone outside of the Church to believe? I suppose it could happen if God wills it, but everything I've seen and read is that belief outside of the Church is no different than that of the demons who believe and tremble (cf. James 2:19), and that's not saving faith. Believers, those who have faith and trust in Jesus Christ as their redeemer, are found in the Church; hence, outside of the Church, there is no salvation.

Well, what can be done then about those wise men who visited the young Child Jesus? These men were magi or magicians, astrologers, very likely descendants and disciples of Babylonian wise men—the same Babylonians who brought the Judeans into exile some 600 years before these wise men saw the star rise. Did they believe in God, trust in His promises? If they did, their faith was incomplete—that is to say, their knowledge of their creator was incomplete, likely only having fragments of what Daniel and the three young men (and other Judean wise men) had left behind after their captivity. So, seeing the star, they knew something was up—they knew that a promised King had been born to the descendants of the Judeans.

So, these pagans packed up their belongings for a long trek. They brought along gifts with them to give to this King, tribute which prefigures his Divine Reign and Death—gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

What did they know? What would they find?

After a long journey, they made their way into Jerusalem. There was no fanfare. There was no celebration. In fact, what they found was the ordinary routine of life in the city. It was probably about two years after they first saw the star, so it was conceivable that there would no longer be any celebration of the birth of this Divine King. At the same time, it must have been strange to find absolutely no sign that ANYTHING had ever happened.

That would help to explain what happened when they made their way to the palace of the king. That's where they found Herod, an Edomite, sitting on the throne. "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." Where would you go to find a newly born prince? You'd go to the palace, but there was no prince there when the wise men arrived. In fact, what they encountered was a worried Herod when they inquired about the King of the Jews, a worry and shock and fear that spread throughout the entire city.

Herod, already plotting to protect his spot on the throne, summoned his own wise men to figure out where the Christ was to be born. They quoted from the Scriptures, parts that the eastern wise men didn't have, and related that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem.

There must have been more shock on the part of the wise men. I imagine that they wondered why these men, for whom the King was born, weren't more excited about this? Why didn't they want to go along with them to Bethlehem to see this Wonder, whom they called Christ or Messiah? Why were they actually dismayed at the news?

The believers—the Chosen People—feared for their lives as the promise has been fulfilled, even as they called this Promise the Christ. The pagans show more faithfulness and awe at the birth of the Son of God.

I suppose it makes some sense in light of the purpose of St. Matthew's Gospel: to be a proof to the Jews that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises made by the prophets. However, doing it like this seems more fitting for St. John's Gospel, wherein the Jews, and especially the disciples, are rebuked for their faithlessness, and certain Gentiles are praised for their faithfulness.

A text like this might cause you a little trouble, too; maybe not on the level of Herod and those in Jerusalem, but some trouble. I mean, who do you most associate with in this text? You probably want to say that you identify with the wise men, going to worship the King of kings, but you aren't pagan magicians! So, do you identify with Herod's wise men? Of course, the words on your lips right now are probably, "I would NEVER do what they did." If you had received news of the birth of the Christ, you wouldn't stay behind and meet it with disdain. You probably wouldn't do what they did; at least, not exactly as they did. You wouldn't meet the birth of the King without celebration—after all, the Christmas holiday was just celebrated these past 12 days, right? You did celebrate Christmas all 12 days, didn't you?

Okay, that's one thing, but the point I'm trying to make is are there not moments in your faith, where you would rather just not...? As in...

- Just not read the Bible...?
- Just not sing the hymns...?
- Just not pray the prayers...?
- Just not go to church (especially for what feels like the 87th time in the last two weeks)...?

And in fact, not "just not do" these things, are there times when you actually dread doing these things? "Do we have to...?"

Your Lord beckons you to be with Him so that He may give you of Himself for your forgiveness, life, and salvation. And the whole thing is so routine to you that you meet it as blasé. Or so often that you meet it with disdain. "Not today, Lord, I'm just not feeling it." "Not again, Lord, I was just there two days ago and two days before that!"

But your attendance at church isn't the only thing in which your faith-life is affected. Your devotional- or prayer-life also aren't the only facets of your life as the Baptized that fall by the wayside as you await the return of the King of kings. I often want to cringe at the accusations of those on the outside of the Church made against those on the inside: "That's not very Christian of you." "It seems to me that the church is more focused on moral judgments and acts than forgiveness and acceptance." "Jesus wouldn't stand for that." Many times, they are wrong, but there's always that one time when what they say is right, or even just part of what they say is right. How can these pagans know more about my faith than I do? How dare pagans rightly accuse me of not being Christ-like?

It tears right at the heart, doesn't it? I guess the challenge is not to be too much like Herod's wise men, to be overcome by so much blasé and malcontent, that you never show up again, that your faith grows cold and dead—that you become indistinguishable from the pagans.

So, what comfort can you who are here take away from this? It was the King of kings that the wise men visited those many years ago. He was born to His own people who rejected Him, but He still came to them. He came for them and for all, that all would be His. And whether you "feel it or not," Jesus still comes to you, too.

Remember those gifts that the magi brought? Gold—to crown Him as King, for He is the King of kings who rules the universe. Frankincense—to burn in worship of a god, for that Child is God, YHWH

in the flesh. Myrrh—to spice a body in preparation for burial, for this Man who is God came to give His life as a ransom for many, believer and pagan alike.

By His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has come to give you forgiveness, life, and salvation. Into this you have been baptized, and in being baptized, you have put on Christ. Therefore, you are in Christ, a new creation. He is your King of kings and Lord of lords, your Divine Ruler and Judge, your God, your Redeemer and Savior. There is much here over which to rejoice and reason to respond joyfully to the invitation to receive this King of the Jews and Christ, whether that's once a week, or for what feels like 87 times over two weeks.

This is His Epiphany—His coming to light—He is the world's Redeemer and Savior, and if He is the world's Redeemer and Savior, then He is your Redeemer and Savior. He came to His own, and He comes to you, right here and now. He has beckoned you to be with Him, and brought you to Himself. You are here, by His doing, to hear His Word, and by being here and hearing that Word, you are saved, for you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.